

## Sydney to Perth 'Over the Top'

*Wandarra at mooring in Coral Bay, Western Australia*

*by Peter McMorrow*

It is certainly unfortunate for most serious boat owners, that the ability to buy and own a luxury passage making motor yacht is usually impeded by a corporate life which cheats us of the time to use it. The purchase of *Wandarra*, my beloved Fleming 55, was a fabulous experience; the exciting selection of engineering and electronics options, swatches of luxury fabrics, tenders and outboard motors, sheets and towels and even down to the plates and glasses, was such fun. So much energy and interest was generated and then came the nightly dreams of far away places, tropical seas and the swish of a cocktail shaker or the whizz of a fishing reel with dinner hooked on the line. Such nights of bliss, only

ruined by the shrill and tedium of a morning alarm clock reminding me that it was time to return to corporate life and the need to pay for all these experiences. Trapped, in my prime!

It was not all bad news though, as we had certainly enjoyed many weekends and holidays aboard *Wandarra*, mooching about Sydney Harbour and further afield on the New South Wales coastline. Very nice opportunities to hone our skills, familiarize ourselves with the new baby and how she performed and suited our needs. However, it was a career change which provided the impetus for 'the big trip' and one needs to turn to the map to see what happens next.

Australia is no puny continent. Vast spaces, often uninhabited and, unlike

the cruising grounds of Europe or the USA, with very sparse and sometimes primitive facilities along the way. Perth, in Western Australia, my new family home, is the most isolated capital city in the world, a five hour flight from the eastern coast and *Wandarra's* home port of Sydney. In order to reunite owner and prized motor yacht, there were three possibilities. Ring a shipping company and have her uplifted and delivered by sea to Perth. Or, have professional crew take her via the Southern Ocean across the Great Australian Bight to Perth, not a matter for the feint hearted. Or, take some time, seize the opportunity, and take the big cruise of a lifetime, 'over the top' as we like to say. A doorway of opportunity had opened and thankfully we had the courage and good sense to step through.

'Over the Top' is not an exercise in dramatics, just the route from Sydney to Perth, north up the coast of NSW, Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, through the Torres Strait between Papua New Guinea and the northern tip of Australia, across the top to Darwin and down the West Australian coast through the legendary Kimberley's, and further down to our new home port of Perth. Over 5,000 nautical miles of tropical seas, coral reefs, dazzling scenery and balmy nights. My dream was upon us, so it was clearly a case of "Have Fleming, will travel."

The most essential word at this stage of the game is logistics. Fuel, water, people, flights, food, emergency scenarios, navigation, local knowledge contacts, safety requirements and tourist information are some of the multitude of details, each one having its own minutiae, and each with significant importance. Once out there, there are few cash tellers, telephones, supermarkets or engine mechanics, so an advanced

state of preparedness was the first requirement. Armed with my most efficient secretary and my sailing friend David Buzzard who had done the trip twice, we divided the journey into ten segments and then further reduced the focus to deal with the requirements of long distance cruising; fuel, crew and food being the most important categories. A review of our folders and documents is almost a textbook case of safe and competent cruise planning, the most significant component being the brilliant engineering and sea keeping of the renowned Fleming 55. As hundreds of others had cruised the world on their Flemings, in comfort and safety, we simply had to fill in the blanks.

So it was that *Wandarra*, having completed stringent testing and servicing at the Fleming HQ in Sydney, departed the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, with fanfare and fandango, on Sunday 17th April 2011, fueled and provisioned the red shirted crew a coiled spring of excitement under the cloudless blue skies, bound

for Perth. Only 5,000 nautical miles to go with an ETA in early October. A team of plastic surgeons could not have wiped the smile off my face.

The New South Wales coastline is reasonably typical of our continent's shores; the golden sandy beaches the first barrier to the mighty Pacific, with occasional ports and rivers being the only opportunities to seek shelter. Mercifully, we moved north in comfortable daily hops, up to Queensland's Gold Coast, a Miami styled vision of chrome and glass high rise resort hotels and apartments. North past Brisbane one moves behind Fraser Island, the worlds largest sand island and begins the journey through sandy straits and coral reefs for several thousand miles to the northern tip of Australia.

The first step of the cruise was primarily a delivery style transit as one is keen to arrive at the Whitsunday Islands and the great glories of the world famous Great Barrier Reef. It is here that legendary explorer Captain James Cook made his remarkable foray



*Wandarra's nose on the beach to refuel at McGowan Island.*

into these uncharted waters in 1770, ending up trapped in a minefield of coral atolls and reefs, spectacular in their grandeur and beauty without the luxury of charts and GPS, but a foreboding and horrifying experience for the uninitiated. Australian islands are in fact, continental islands insomuch that they reflect the typical features and vegetation of the main continent. One has to slide into the resorts to find the lush tropical palms and vegetation associated with the typical tropical island, however the extraordinary beauty of the waters and coral reefs have to be seen to be truly appreciated. Ocean anchorages behind sunken reefs, deserted islands with glistening white beaches, and the sparkling blue sea make for a heady mix, and with the quiet confidence of *Wandarra's* twin Cummins diesels, it is not hard to unwind into a serene and languid state, occasionally lubricated (at anchor) by a well chilled quality wine or spirit.

This coast is well provisioned for the cruising sailor, with modern marinas offering safe havens and full facilities for all one's needs. We ambled from island to island, enjoying fishing, snorkeling and general exploratory missions, with the occasional lunch or dinner ashore. As one heads north the continental landscape becomes quite mountainous and adds to the drama and spectacle of the scenery. Following Cook's log of the *Endeavour* one marvels at the feat of navigation which lead them through this maze, and arriving at Lizard Island, a dramatic outcrop north of Cairns, one climbs the mountain and can only stare with amazement at the gap in the reef which provided *Endeavour* with an exit and safe passage home. All a rather humbling experience. Mind you, our cruising routine was somewhat different to Cook's as we settled for the night with a Chicken Cacciatore, Banana daiquiris and watched 'Master and Commander'. Exactly who held that title aboard

out little ship is still a matter for considerable debate.

North from here one moves into the wilds of Australia with very few facilities, negligible population or settlements and very much the feeling of the long passage we were making. Island hopping, fishing and the odd burst of wind and weather make for exciting passages, however our first and only mechanical defect occurred at this point with the failure of the starboard engine fuel pump. As dreary as this was, one can be thankful that Fleming prefer twin engines of suitable size to continue the passage with some confidence, and once in electronic range we were able to contact Cummins in Sydney who located a replacement pump, and thanks to our extended warranty plan, promptly flew the part in the capable care of Robert the mechanic who then made the installation and put everything back to normal. During this two day interval we scoured and cleaned the ship, played cards and Scrabble and attended to more serious matters such as crab pots and their contents.



*Mud crabs a plenty in Arnham Land*

At this point we had traveled some 1800 miles since departing Sydney and were now at Cape York, the northern most tip of Australia, having paused at Sydney Island where William Bligh landed to 're-provision' his longboat on his way to Timor after the mutiny on the *Bounty*. No such animosity aboard *Wandarra* as our team of dedicated chefs, wine connoisseurs, vigorous fishermen and stalwart navigators were amiably making this

voyage of wonder and pleasure. We celebrated our luck thus far with a very well chilled champagne.

Thursday Island in the Torres Strait was our stopping off point for a 350nm crossing of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and as we had not had the opportunity to refuel, we resorted to the graph paper and prepared a consumption/speed/distance chart which accurately monitored these variables. A lonely trip without land or another vessel in sight, averaging 8.6 knots and 3.17 litres per nautical mile, *Wandarra* finally picked up a mooring in Gove Harbour and we could all relax with a delicious smoked salmon and champagne lunch. Unlike the other fish that had mysteriously 'got away' despite the expert handling of lines and nets, the salmon was deliciously trapped in its plastic packaging. Gove Harbour has a huge processing plant for alumina and bauxite and the lights and wharves provided a night spectacle not seen since Sydney Harbour.

With a weeks respite and a crew change we mooched across the top to





*BBQ in "Casurina Creek", bouncing classical music off the cliffs.*

*Skipper with trusty fishing guide, Capt. Dan.*



Darwin, accompanied by our pilot, Captain Dan with his 18' fishing boat in tow, at times, in conditions of remarkable glassy calm. With fresh fish and crabs cooked on our aft deck each evening, we experienced the solitude of the gulf, not another vessel sighted on this leg of the journey. After a few days wandering about Darwin, Capt Dan departed, leaving strict instruction for fishing spots, and we again departed into the wilds, heading for the fabled Kimberley coast, arriving on the last day of July in the Berkley River and motoring about 15 miles upstream. This is a photographer's delight with the most spectacular and untouched scenery of ancient sandstone cliffs and rock formations, striated in bands of yellow and brown, with gorges and waterfalls and not a sign of mankind in evidence. It is here that the full impact

of our great and wondrous country becomes apparent, the wide brown land girt by sea. Blazing sunsets and a curved night sky intoxicates the soul as a raised fingertip seems to touch the heavens. In this environment, one feels like a mere speck and the passage of city life and indeed, the whole complexities of our normal daily existence seem to be in a parallel universe. Man meets nature and this is the true joy of cruising.

Without too much bias, and without criticism of our past cruising grounds, we had arrived into a wonderland of rivers and islands, a coastline peppered with adventure opportunities and scenery which would dazzle even the most jaded onlooker. The boutique cruise industry has finally discovered the Kimberley coast, but having our own private cruise ship, dexterous



Early morning "Champers" arrival - Berkley River, Kimberley.

into navigable rivers and estuaries, is a complete and absolute thrill. This is monsoonal territory, the sandstone and limestone cliffs and creeks gouged by extreme summer weather storms and floods, but during our visit the temperate climate and dry weather with sparkling skies was a tonic for the weary. You could reasonably describe the vegetation as savannah.

One is never tempted into the waters, a dynamic combination of sharks and crocodile poised to make a delicious human into lunch, however the keen fisherman can score barramundi or Spanish mackerel amongst others. Having been given some 'local

knowledge' by our experienced pilot, the wealth of knowledge led through this wonderland via all the secret fishing and crabbing spots never seen by the average traveler. Ashore, the explorations will uncover amazing caves with almost Gothic chambers, Aboriginal paintings and a landscape of staggering beauty which seems to change by the hour according to the light. It is a mesmerizing feast of nature completely humbling to human life.

Another crew change courtesy of



Aboriginal rock art "Wanjina", Kimberley.



Large Croc nicknamed "Maximus"- Hunter River, waiting for next crew to come in by chopper

Cessna and helicopter, and it is a joy to see their response to the scenery, other than an alarming moment when a 5 metre crocodile contemplated the delicious looking crew perched on a rock with nowhere to run or climb. A hasty retreat to the Fleming and multiple wines to calm shattered nerves. The following day, whilst burning rubbish, another croc sighting actually turned out to be chickens, something of a relief, but an alarming error. Some of us had 'croc fever'. With various detours and explorations, we arrived at Silver Gull Creek where we refueled and met some very interesting locals who had decided to reduce their clothing to the bare minimum. Their outside 'dunny' won the Toilet of the Year award. A memorable stopover.

Whale sightings are commonplace in the Kimberly's, however one pod of four decided they were keen to inspect a Fleming at close quarters and the crew stood on the bow as they literally brushed past the hull at touching distance. This is a completely breathtaking experience and the sheer size of these creatures next to *Wandarra* was so extraordinary in their power and yet so passive as they slid past. On some days, our fishing forays were less than spectacular and occasionally we were forced to prepare something from the fridge, however, a strike off Beagle Bay saw a metre long mackerel brought aboard and the back deck was awash with blood and guts, a glorious moment for the hunters and fisherman of our crew!

Broome is the pearling capital of Australia and a bustling town with huge tidal beaches and many luxury resort hotels. It has become the starting point for the small boutique ships that cruise the region, enjoying the rare pleasures that we have just encountered. One

could not recommend this stage of the journey more highly, whether it be aboard a private vessel such as the Fleming or aboard a small ship with tour guides and rubber ducky's to explore the rivers in. It was an absolutely remarkable six weeks of my life.

The final stages of the coastal passage, like the journey north from Sydney, are long and interesting but without the intimacy of the Great Barrier Reef or Kimberley's. Nevertheless, our new crews enjoyed the sandy beaches and coastal towns of Exmouth and Carnarvon, with the family flying out from there to Perth, and then a delivery passage for *Wandarra*, arriving at the Royal Perth Yacht Club on Sunday, 2nd October.



*Skipper having "pre-dinners" with wife Bernie and kids Jo and David - Ningaloo WA*

Other than our fuel pump and some minor irritations of little consequence, our trusty Fleming 55 had carried the various crews

with safety and confidence, and considerable comfort, over 5,000 nautical miles and nearly 640 hours of motoring. It really was the trip of a lifetime and completely validated the purchase of *Wandarra*. Everyone was overjoyed and many have quipped "When are you getting a new job in Sydney so we can take her back, Over the Top?"



*A free shower in King George River, Kimberley.*